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ABSTRACT

Considerable attention has been paid to the question of whether altruism increases with age through the years of childhood and early adolescence. The relationship between age and helping was examined for 128 boys and 128 girls in the first experiment. A second sample of an additional 256 participants was then studied to investigate factors which may inhibit helping behaviors. Results were consistent with earlier findings of a curvilinear relationship between age and helping, with 4th and 10th graders helping significantly more than 1st and 7th graders. More help was given to a toddler than to an age-peer and to a person whose injury appeared serious. Results from the second sample suggested that helping by younger children was inhibited by fear of possible inadequacy, while helping by adolescents was inhibited by fear of disapproval or sensitivity to possible embarrassment felt by potential recipients. Helping was inhibited least under the conditions of high recipient dependency (very young victim, serious injury). (Author/JAC)

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COMPETENCE, RETICENCE AND HELPING BY CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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COMPETENCE, RETICENCE AND HELPING BY CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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Considerable attention has been paid to the question of whether altruism increases with age through the years of childhood and early adolescence. In general, sharing has been found to increase, and selfishness to decrease with age, at least from ages three through eleven. For example, Ugurel-Semin (1952) found that in one situation, selfishness decreased from 67% in 4- and 6-year-olds, to 0% among 11- to 16-year olds. In other studies, in which children won valuable chips while playing a game and had the opportunity to donate some to "needy children," older children tended to be considerably more generous than younger children (Elliot & Vasta, 1970; Midlarsky & Bryan, 1972; Midlarsky, Bryan & Brickman, 1973; Peterson, in press; Rushton, 1975; Rushton & Wiener, 1975).

In contrast to the linear relationship between age and altruism found in donation studies, Staub (1970; 1978) has found a curvilinear relationship between age and helping behavior, where the helping involved the rescue of another person, rather than the donation of material resources. Staub's explanation of this finding was that rescue behavior by children increases until a point at which this behavior is inhibited by the fear of behaving "inappropriately" in a novel situation. In this study as in others (cf. Staub, 1978), Staub's findings indicated that while helping is generally expected to increase with age because of the increase in actual and/or perceived competence (cf. Midlarsky, in press),

there are demonstrably instances in which age may interact with other variables, such as presumed rules of social conduct, to inhibit helping.

The study described in this paper was designed to further explore the relationship between age and helping, and to determine some of the factors which may tend to inhibit helping at different ages. It was predicted that help-giving may generally be inhibited in younger children by lack of perceived competence, and older children may become reticent where social "embarrassment" seems probable. It was also predicted that help-giving is less likely to be inhibited where the victim is a very young child--both because the need of a very young child may be perceived as relatively greater (as a result of the child's presumed incompetence), and because the potential helper may be less likely to be inhibited by his or her own perceived incompetence or the possibility of embarrassment. In addition, it was proposed that children and adolescents would be more likely to give help when the injury appeared more severe.

Sample 1

The experimental study with Sample 1 was designed to investigate the relationship between age and help given to a physically injured victim. A four-by-two-by-two-by-two factorial design was employed. Independent variables were grade (first, fourth, seventh and tenth), sex of potential helper, victim age (preschooler or age-peer), and intensity of injury (low vs. high).

Method

Subjects.--The experimental subjects were 128 boys and 128 girls, randomly selected from public school classes in the Denver metropolitan area. The school and classes participating in the study were chosen from a large group that had frequently conducted field trips to the Denver Children's Museum. Children who played the role of the preschool victim of an accident consisted of 32 three- and four-year-old boys and girls. Sixteen children--two boys and two girls in each of the school grades represented in the study--served as "peer victims." The experimenter was a female faculty member.

Materials and procedures.--The experiment was conducted in a large, unfinished space in the museum, in which materials and props were stored, and exhibits planned by the museum staff. Within this room, which resembled part of the back-stage area of some large theatres, was a table containing a large album with glossy pictures of potential museum exhibits, a rating sheet and pencil, a chair, and an intercom to the office of the experimenter.

The experimenter brought each subject separately to the work-table, and she then introduced herself as a consultant who was helping to design and create what she hoped were appealing, educational exhibits. The subject was informed that s/he was being asked to look at a book containing photographs of 30 proposed exhibits, and to rate each one. S/he was also told that the experimenter would return to her own office to work while the participant was busy, but if needed, the participant could either come to her office (the door was in plain sight) or call her on the intercom.

Approximately three minutes after the experimenter left the room, and as participants worked in the room alone, another child was observed to enter the room, walking quickly. That person then bumped into a table, and fell heavily to the floor. The victim exclaimed loudly that s/he was hurt, and held his/her right knee. Half of the participants were exposed to an injury in which after loudly proclaiming that s/he was hurt, the person was able to stand up, whereas half saw an injury in which the victim was unable to get up. For half the participants, the injured person was a preschooler, and for half, s/he was an age-peer. Within conditions formed by grade, victim age and intensity of injury, victims were randomly assigned to participants with the restriction that each subject was paired with a collaborator of his or her own sex. Dependent variables included whether help was attempted (yes-no), number of helping acts, and time before onset of helping (latency).

Results

The child and adolescent participants in this study had diverse reactions to the injured victim, ranging from no helping response (20%) to one or more of a variety of helping acts. The diverse responses to the injured person are presented in Table 1.

Among the 80% of participants who emitted one or more than one helping response, there was variation in accordance with grade level. The distribution of percentages across grades indicates that 91% of fourth graders and 83% of 10th graders helped, followed by 72% and 73% of 1st and 7th graders, respectively.

The major dependent variable was the number of seconds that elapsed prior to the onset of any helping act (latency), for all children who

did provide help. The means and standard deviations for the latency data are presented in Table 2.

Analysis of variance of the latency variable yielded significant main effects for grade F (3, 172) = 49.32, $p < .001$, victim age F (1, 172) = 94.45, $p < .001$, and intensity of injury F (1, 172) = 62.44, $p < .001$. Preschool-age victims were helped considerably faster ($\bar{X}$ = 9.76 secs.) than were peer victims ($\bar{X}$ = 16.71 secs.), and calculation of eta squared indicated that this variable accounted for approximately 17% of the total variance. The intensity of the injury was also important in determining latency of response, with more intensely injured victims being helped more rapidly ($\bar{X}$ = 10.09 secs.) than less intensely injured victims ($\bar{X}$ = 15.75 secs.). Intensity of injury accounted for 11% of the variance. A Newman-Keuls was calculted on the mean latencies for the main effect of grade. Results of this analysis indicated that as predicted, there was a curvilinear relationship between age and help. Fourth graders helped more than did first graders ($p < .05$) and seventh graders ($p < .05$). In addition, there was no significant difference in the helping by 1st and 7th graders, and help by the 10th graders fell between the amounts for 4th and 7th graders, and was significantly different from both ($p < .05$).

Several interactions had impacts upon the speed of response, as well. Significant effects were found for grade x victim, grade x intensity, grade x sex, victim x sex and grade x victim x intensity. Table 2 presents the summary of the analysis of variance of the latency data.

Newman-Keuls analyses performed on the significant interaction

between grade and victim age indicated that the most rapid helping was done by 4th graders when the victim was a toddler ($\bar{X}$ = 5.50 secs.), whereas the slowest response was by 7th graders confronted by an injured peer ($\bar{X}$ = 25.63). In regard to the interaction between grade and intensity of injury, 4th graders--most of whom reacted very quickly to the distress of another--did not make distinctions based on intensity, whereas 1st, 7th and 10th graders did. Seventh graders confronted with a low intensity injury were the slowest to react of all groups ($p < .05$), whereas the quickest to respond were 4th graders confronted with a low-intensity injury. Analysis of the grade x sex interaction indicated that 4th grade females reacted most quickly, and 7th grade males responded most slowly. However, there were no significant differences in the speeds of response by males and females within any grade. Within every grade but the 4th, where helping was generally done at a rapid rate, preschool-age victims were helped significantly more rapidly than peer-victims ($p < .01$).

During the debriefing interviews with participants, a sizable number--particularly in grades 1 and 7--remarked that they felt reticent about helping. This reticence, or "embarrassment" appeared to be most frequently experienced when the victim was a peer.

Sample 2

The second sample was studied to explore the perceptions by children and adolescents regarding factors which may inhibit helping in situations like the one employed in the experimental investigation. While participants in the experiment were also interviewed regarding

factors which motivated and inhibited them, their responses were regarded as generative and suggestive. The rationale was that it is difficult to employ a single group both as actors and as evaluators. Inquiring about motives prior to observing behavior is likely to be a highly reactive procedure, wherein the interview may influence subsequent behavior (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz & Sechrest, 1966). On the other hand, respondents' accounts of their motives following their participation in experimental research may be shaped, at least in part, by reflections on their own proximal behavior in that research (cf. Midlarsky & Midlarsky, 1975). Hence, the approach used here was to draw a second sample comparable to the first, and to ask them about 1) their own probable responses in a situation like the one employed in the experiment, and 2) probable factors facilitating or inhibiting help in that situation (cf. Smith & Midlarsky, in press).

Method

The second sample in this investigation consisted of an additional 256 individuals, with age and sex distributions identical to those in the first sample, and drawn from a group of schools highly similar to the first in demographic composition. Thirty-two groups, each consisting of 8 respondents of a single gender were tested. The study was conducted in the same room used for the first sample. The collaborators and the experimenter were identical to those interacting with Sample 1.

For each group, the experimenter described the scenario witnessed by a counterpart group in Study 1 (e.g., Preschool Victim, Low Intensity, or Peer Victim, High Intensity). Two children or adolescents of the

appropriate ages role-played the scenario up to, but not inclusive of the helping act. Participants were instructed to note, on an anonymous questionnaire form, whether or not they would provide help in that situation. They were also asked what might prevent or inhibit helping if they chose not to help.

Results

Results obtained from Sample 2 indicated that the percentages of pupils responding that they would or would not help was very similar to the percentages of pupils actually helping in Sample 1. These results are summarized in Table 4.

First-graders indicated that perceptions by themselves or others that they lacked the competence to help would be the primary motive in failing to help. Comments included: "I wouldn't know what to do;" "I'm too young to be helpful," and "The other kid would thinks I'm too young too help." Lack of competence was least likely where the purported victim was a toddler, or where the injury seemed more severe. Few fourth-graders gave reasons for failing to help (and the preponderance said they would help). However, those citing reasons indicated lack of competence or perceptions of incompetence, as did the first-graders. Seventh and tenth-graders gave two kinds of reasons for not helping: the sense that one should not help a stranger in this novel situation based on fear of disapproval (more predominant among the 7th graders), and the fear that potential recipients might be embarrassed at an offer of help, and might see it as "condescending" (more typical among tenth-

graders). This reticence was expressed more when the potential recipient was described as an age-peer rather than as a toddler, and more when the injury was described as relatively minor.

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Footnote

Acknowledgments and thanks are extended to Susan Midlarsky, for the insights and hunches about social behavior--and the dimensions of reticence--which helped to generate this study.

TABLE 1

BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES TO INJURED CHILD

Response	Weight
Said and/or did nothing	0
Waited until E returned, and then reported	1
Used intercom or shouted out to summon E	3
Ran or walked to E's office to summon her	4
Called out to victim (e.g., "Can I help?" "Is there something I can do?" "Are you okay?"	5
Offered concrete help-verbally from seat	7
Ran or walked to victim offering help	8
Gave or offered concrete help when at victim's side (e.g., helped to a chair, actively sympathized)	9

Note.--Weights were assigned by averaging numerical ratings by participants in Study 2.

TABLE 2

AVERAGE LATENCIES OF HELPING

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Grade		
1	17.53	11.56
4	6.86	2.96
7	17.02	9.63
10	11.17	6.07
Victim		
Preschooler	9.76	8.06
Peer	16.71	8.86
Injury		
Low Intensity	15.75	11.06
High Intensity	10.09	5.76
Sex		
Male	12.71	6.91
Female	12.75	10.81

TABLE 3

SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF HELPING LATENCIES

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F
Main Effects				
Grade	4540.20	3	1513.40	49.32***
Victim	2897.92	1	2897.22	94.45***
Intensity of Injury	1915.79	1	1915.79	62.44***
Sex	31.02	1	31.02	1.01
Significant 2-Way Interactions				
Grade x Victim	796.77	3	265.59	8.66***
Grade x Intensity	384.70	3	128.23	4.18**
Grade x Sex	343.02	3	114.34	3.73**
Victim x Sex	352.88	1	352.88	11.50***
Significant 3-Way Interaction				
Grade x Vict. x Intens.	556.48	3	185.49	6.05***

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$
***$p < .001$

TABLE 4

HELPING BY SAMPLE 1 COMPARED TO PROBABLE HELPING BY SAMPLE 2

School Grade	Sample 1 % Actual Help	Sample 2 % Likely to Help
1	72	70
4	91	92
7	73	69
10	83	83